



For Immediate Release

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Talbot County Council Meeting Highlights, Tuesday, February 8, 2022

These highlights only reflect the business items covered from the Council's approved agenda. To view the complete County Council meeting, please visit: Talbot County Meeting Videos - Talbot County, Maryland (www.talbotcountymd.gov).

The Talbot County Council held their regularly scheduled meeting virtually on February 8 with all Council members present.

Update from Neighborhood Service Center, Inc. on Ridgeway Shelter – Marilyn Neal, Executive Director, Neighborhood Service Center

Ridgeway Shelter Property

Marilyn Neal reported the Neighborhood Service Center's (NSC) Ridgeway Shelter opened in 1991 to house, feed, and provide case management services (pre-pandemic) to 30 to 45 men and women each year. The 1,384-square-foot house located at 120 Aurora Street in Easton was built in 1920. The purpose of the shelter has been to move homeless individuals toward permanent and transitional housing. Pre-pandemic, Ridgeway provided three beds for women and three beds for men. During the pandemic, service levels have dropped to one resident per room because of pandemic shelter adjustments.

Ms. Neal shared that a few years ago, Ridgeway Shelter transitioned into a low-barrier shelter that no longer requires criminal background checks or drug test screenings for admission. The drawbacks of a low-barrier shelter have included an increase in resident-on-resident violence, onsite drug and alcohol abuse activity, the need for a police presence to resolve resident disputes, and housing individuals with current outstanding arrest warrants. Ridgeway has experienced gaps in resident safety concerns, consistent staffing for inclement weather and holidays, onsite security, and lack of certified on-site support to address resident needs (an influx of customers that need a wide range of health and substance abuse services).

She reported that the NSC was granted the approval to utilize its Ridgeway Shelter, located at 120 Aurora Street, as affordable housing for a large family instead of a shelter. There are several reasons for this change. First, Talbot Interfaith Shelter is set to expand its homeless shelter

services. Reuse of this space is still within NSC's mission of "working toward eliminating poverty by empowering families and individuals to become self-sufficient." Ms. Neal pointed out that Talbot County needs more affordable housing units that are set so that low-income families can be housed; preventing their eviction and enabling them to thrive. This reuse also helps NSC to meet its goals of: Preventing homelessness; Increasing affordable housing units; Assisting families toward self-sufficiency; and Removing barriers to poverty. NSC will continue to address homelessness prevention through the inclusion of congregate living space (Webb's Hope), the opening of permanent housing (low-income housing at 6 S. Street in Easton), and affordable housing units for small families at 104 A Port Street; 104 B Port Street, and 117 Port Street.

The NSC also provides programs to prevent homelessness including 2GEN Whole Families Program (case management and goal planning for families and a housing unit at 6 South Street); emergency services to low-income individuals who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, and/or financially affected by COVID-19. Through the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP 1), NSC, in partnership with Talbot County, provided 600 services (329 rental assistance; 225 utility assistance; 10 other housing-related/homelessness prevention services) between April 2021 and January 2022. Through ERAP 2, NSC, as a sub-recipient to Talbot County, will receive an additional \$1,678,514. This is projected to save nearly 400 households from eviction. NSC's Homeless Solutions Program provides crisis housing stabilization services, rapid rehousing, outreach services, and emergency hotel placement for people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

NSC Services

Ms. Neal shared that NSC still needs funding after the closure of Ridgeway Shelter because the agency will continue to provide the following services:

- Continuation of Bilingual Emergency Services Coordinator's Position (grant funding is set to run out Sept. 2022)
- Continuation of Food Pantry Coordinator Position (funding is set to run out June 2022)
- Addition of ERAP Office Assistant (this program needs additional support due to the high volume of services provided - current funding is capped)
- Contract Support Services for Emergency Services and Overall Office Support
- Overall Operating Budget Support

She added that the NSC Services for FY22 include 2 GEN/ Whole Families Case Management, COVID-19 Relief (CSBG CARES), Eviction Prevention Payment, Mobile Food Pantry, Affordable Housing, COVID-19 Relief (CDBG CARES), First Month's Rent Payment, On the Job Training for Homeless Individuals, After School Program, COVID-19 Relief (HSP CARES), Food Pantry, Rapid Rehousing, Acquisition of Birth Certificates and Identification, COVID-19 Relief (LIHEAP CARES), Heating Assistance, Responsible Fathers Program, Career Pathways (Ages 16 – 24), Emergency Food Package, Home and Auto Repairs, Rental Assistance, Burial Assistance (COVID-19), Emergency Rental Assistance Program "ERAP," Maryland Energy

Assistance Program, Senior Employment Program, Medication Assistance, Summer Youth Program, Temporary Hotel Placement, and assistance with Utilities.

Council member Divilio, who serves as the Council liaison with the NSC, commented, “There are so many different foundations, charity organizations, businesses and individuals who help NSC and just help Talbot County in general. And we couldn't do it without them. For example, Ms. Neal made a connection with a local business that was able to provide a vehicle to an individual at no cost so that they could get to work. You have to have transportation to get to work. So those are the connections that she makes to make sure that the organization stays strong, stays well, and that services are provided.”

Update on Emergency Rental Assistance Program – Mary Kay Verdery, Grants Administrator

Ms. Verdery shared that in May of 2021, the Council was notified that they had received \$2,439,498 to administer the Department of Housing and Community Development’s grant for the Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) to ensure housing stability for families and individuals at risk of experiencing homelessness or utility cut-off. A grant agreement was executed between Talbot County and DHCD and a sub-recipient agreement was finalized in August 2021 between Talbot County and Neighborhood Service Center (NSC). The deadline for spending the first round of ERAP program funds is September 30, 2022. The funds cover rental and utility assistance and other housing and service-related costs and program administration costs. The Neighborhood Service Center (NSC) completes the screening to determine eligibility, issues the funds, and provides report information to the County. She reported that to date NSC has distributed over \$1.65 million to approximately 600 beneficiaries – about 68% of the budget. She stated that the NSC is doing a great job in getting the word out and helping the individuals get their applications processed. Due to the high percentage of rental assistance, the organization is requesting a budget modification to reallocate some of the utility and other housing-related funds into the rental category so that they can continue to provide that assistance.

Ms. Verdery announced that Talbot County will be receiving a new award and grant agreement for ERAP 2 funds in the amount of \$1,678,514. Once received, the new grant agreement for ERAP 2 will define new spending timelines. Approximately \$1.2 million in rental and utility assistance has been distributed to landlords and utility companies for past due and future billing needs of qualified individuals. The funding needs are shifting from primarily rental assistance at the beginning of the program to more utility and other housing-related costs. Talbot County and NSC have established a DHCD approved temporary relocation policy for quarantining, eviction and renovation stays with defined criteria and exit plans. Citizens can log onto the NSC website (nscTalbotMD.org) for applications and instructions or talbotCOVID19.org for rent relief.

Council member Pack commented, “ERAP is a big deal for a number of reasons. It keeps persons with a roof over the top of their heads. It also allows those funds to go to those property owners and landlords who have also been burdened by COVID. COVID has impacted the renter but also impacted the homeowners and property owners who are renting these parcels.”

**Update by Department of Economic Development and Tourism – Cassandra Vanhooser,
Director, Department of Economic Development and Tourism**

Eastern Shore Business Sentiment Survey Summary Report February 2022

Cassandra Vanhooser reported that her office has given out \$3.27 million in small business grants between June 2020 and December 2021. These funds included Federal CARES grants, plus State grants for restaurants, lodging establishments, nonprofits, and online sales and teleworking. She stated that overall, it's been a very successful program. Ten county businesses applied for Emergency Flood Grants through Maryland Capital Enterprises. Nine businesses received grants for a total of \$160,000 to offset the cost of the damages.

She reported that the Talbot County Incentive Fund helped support Aphena Pharma Solution's \$7 million expansion enabling them to purchase two adjoining facilities to create a 27-acre pharmaceutical manufacturing campus in Easton. Aphena has hired 150 fixed hourly and salaried employees bringing their total employees to 270 – a 66% growth and they're continuing to hire. She stated that this is a great business for the County to support and that helping support this project is keeping people employed.

Ms. Vanhooser added that the County is becoming adept at leveraging its partnerships to provide business assistance. The partnerships include the Small Business Development Center (SBDC), the Mid-Shore Regional Council, the Eastern Shore Regional GIS Cooperative, BEACON at Salisbury University, Upper Shore Workforce Development Board, and the Maryland Department of Commerce. She shared that the Small Business Development Center reported from October 2020 to September of 2021 that they provided free and confidential counseling to 31 businesses in Talbot County and provided 99 training events, supporting 816 jobs. She added that they reported five successful loan applications for a total investment in Talbot County of \$432,931. She shared that in the first quarter of fiscal year 2022 they served 15 businesses and worked with two businesses providing \$130,000 in loans. She explained that Talbot County contributes \$6,000 a year to the SBDC and the SBDC counselor Greg Barr is at Bay Street every Tuesday from 12 to 4 p.m. to help businesses. The SBDC also offers numerous webinars and custom events. Vanhooser also does regular client updates with them and tracks Talbot County businesses to make sure that people are staying on track.

Another project Vanhooser reported on is the Eastern Shore Business Recovery Project and the Business Sentiment Survey, funded by the EDA. Talbot County did a survey in June of 2021 and released those results and built the tools that go with it and then administered another survey in December 2021. She reported that overall, the Eastern Shore has a very positive outlook for the next 12 months, but it has dipped some since June of 2021. Respondents said that COVID-19 both created new problems and exacerbated existing ones with the labor force issues at the top of the list of barriers for both starting and expanding of business. The respondents also listed inflation as a growing concern over supply chain issues over the last six months. She also reported that 43% of the people in the entire Eastern Shore who took the survey are located in Talbot County. She shared the complete survey report with Council members.

In the area of Marketing and Communications, Vanhooser reported that on the Talbot Works website, the most viewed page has been the COVID-19 resources and the blog is very popular.

She is telling the story of Talbot County businesses through the department's newsletter every month. She added that her staff keeps up with social media posts on Facebook and LinkedIn, platforms that are best suited for economic development. Although the Department's private sector calls ended in June, it continues to do them on an as-needed basis.

Vanhooser reported that in 2022, she will continue doing public outreach with our Eastern Shore Economic Recovery Project, continue to actively seek resources for Talbot County businesses, and focus on retention, expansion, and attraction of businesses to the county.

Council Vice President Leshar commented, "I do recall when I was still on the Easton Town Council a number of years ago when Easton and the County collaborated in paving the way for Aphena's pharmaceutical expansion. We were told then that this was going to result in at least 150 new jobs and it seems like we've already exceeded that goal. This is very encouraging for the quality jobs that this program has brought to the community. It's nice to see a program like that, come from the early stages to full fruition in the community. And that Aphena is continuing to hire is great news."

Council member Price added, "If you look at the results of the Business Sentiment Survey, and you see that 43% came from Talbot County out of all those counties – it's just amazing to get that kind of feedback. Hopefully, the other counties will see how important that information is to have in seeing where to support our businesses and where the problems are. You worked hard at getting the survey out there and encouraging our businesses to participate. So, along with everything else, thank you very much for that."

Public Hearing:

Bill No. 1496, A BILL TO REPEAL AND REENACT CHAPTER 102, "PARKS AND RECREATION," TALBOT COUNTY CODE AND TO ENACT A NEW CHAPTER 76 ENTITLED "GOLF BOARD"

A public hearing was held on Bill No. 1496 which codifies rules and regulations for parks in the County and separates the Golf Board into its own chapter in the Talbot County Code. County Attorney Patrick Thomas explained that Bill No. 1496 incorporates all of the changes that were discussed in a work session held by the Council this past summer. Council member Divilio asked that public comment on Bill No. 1496 be open until the next Council meeting when the bill will have its third reader and be eligible for vote.

Discussion of Pending General Assembly Legislation

Senate Bill 288 – Talbot County – Board of Education – Election of Officers – The bill changes the date for the election of officers for the Talbot County Board of Education to December. The Council voted unanimously to write a letter of support for SB288.

House Bill 633 – Education - Accountability and Implementation Board - Membership – The bill proposes expanding the membership of the Accountability and Implementation Board from 7 to 11 members, to include representation from the Eastern Shore. The Council voted unanimously to write a letter of support HB633.

County Manager's Report:

Board and Committee Appointments: Mr. Stamp requested the following appointments to Boards and Committees:

- Short Term Rental Review Board – Mr. Stamp requested the appointment of Michele LaRocca and Keith Watts to the Short-Term Rental Review Board. The Council voted unanimously to approve the appointments as presented.
- Board of Appeals – Mr. Stamp requested the reappointment of Louis Dorsey, Jr. as a full member, the appointment of Jeffrey Adelman as a full member and the appointment of Patrick Forrest as an alternate member to the Board of Appeals. The Council voted unanimously to approve the appointments as presented.
- Tourism Board – Mr. Stamp requested the appointment of Mary Kellogg to the Tourism Board. The Council voted unanimously to approve the appointment as presented.

Request from Department of Parks and Recreation to Utilize FY22 Contingency Funds for Purchase of John Deere Compact Utility Tractor Approved in FY21: Mr. Stamp requested the approval to utilize \$22,800 in contingency funds for the purchase of a John Deere compact utility tractor from Atlantic Tractor. This item was originally budgeted in FY 21, however, due to a supply chain issue, the tractor was not available until now. Joye Nagle, Finance Director, has confirmed contingency funds are available for this purpose. The Council voted unanimously to approve the use of contingency funds for the purchase of the tractor.

Request from Hog Neck Golf Course for Fee Increases for 2022 Season – Rich Setter reported on Hog Neck Golf Course – Fee Increases – Rich Setter, General Manager of the Hog Neck Golf Course presented fee increases for the 2022 season. To stay competitive with other area golf courses, Setter suggested a basic \$100 increase across the board for the annual membership to the course and a \$5 increase for morning and mid-day rates on the weekends. The Council voted unanimously to approve the fee increases as presented.

Council member Divilio commented, “Rich, you've done a fantastic job with the Pro Shop at the Golf Course, providing a great selection of products – from golf balls to shirts to everything. If anybody in the community is looking for any golf goods, I would highly recommend going to Hog Neck first to support your local golf course.”

Mr. Stamp concluded, “I just want to take a moment to recognize and thank the Council for your leadership. You wrestle with some difficult things, day in and day out. Under your leadership for the last two years, staff, organizations, and the community have come together and are still working to wrestle with serious issues related to an individual's ability to survive. Our EMS workers are on the frontline with our health care workers and we've been working hard to coordinate relief for them. It's something truly to be proud of in our community. And I think sometimes it's easy to just kind of forget that. And I just wanted to remind the community that there's a lot of passionate people out there working hard for a great community.”

Mr. Stamp reported that the County Offices would be closed for President's Day on February 21, 2022.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:35 p.m. The next Council meeting will be held virtually on February 22, 6 p.m.